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A Critical Analysis of David Lynch's 'Eraserhead' (1977): Whose Dream is it After All?

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ABSTRACT

'Eraserhead' (1977), directed by David Lynch, has intrigued and interested film critics for decades. A cinematic puzzle, David Lynch successfully creates a surreal and dystopian world through Eraserhead. With its twisted plotline and ambiguous subject matter, very few cinema enthusiasts have successfully maneuvered through the movie's diegesis. Lynch, who is largely considered the best postmodern filmmaker of all time, manages to create a reel enigma through 'Eraserhead'. This paper makes a dedicated attempt at deconstructing the movie using the auteur and psychoanalytical film theories. It also finds out the ingrained themes used by Lynch in designing the nightmarish and hallucinatory world of 'Eraserhead'. In doing so, the paper critically dissects all the cinematic elements used by the auteur. There is also an ingrained objective to highlight the psyche of the director in making this cinematic quagmire.

Introduction

Grotesque, dystopian, post-apocalyptic, weird, strangely illuminating, corrupt, disturbing, hallucinatory – well, the adjectives that can adorn 'Eraserhead', David Lynch's most surrealist of works can be multifarious. The film, though, remains strongly etched in the annals of cinematic history – not because it disturbs human sensibilities but because it imparts a new definition to the concept of logic. Hans Ruedi Giger, the Swiss surrealist painter, once called 'Eraserhead' as one of the greatest movies of all time (Giger, 2018). The reasons are not very difficult to find though. Surrealist art, as a whole, took a fresh course after Lynch released his maiden feature-length venture.

As an auteur, Lynch has always taken liberties. With 'Eraserhead', even the concept of cinematic liberty stood changed. With 'Eraserhead', he creates a strange dystopian world that challenges the sacrosanct ideas of morality and propriety. However, abstract ideas can seldom drive the point home. Therefore, let us make a dedicated attempt at going a little further down the aisle.

Deconstructing the Movie

To begin with, let us look at the fundamental plotline of the movie just in case we are charitable enough to call it a plotline. It features a nondescript man by the name of Henry Spencer, who stays alone in a nondescript mechanized city. The man looks nerdish and has a peculiar hairdo, something that was to become a cult depiction over the next few decades. He is invited to his girlfriend's apartment. Once at the apartment, strange and abnormal things happen. His girlfriend's mother asks him uncomfortable questions and tries to have sex with him forcibly. In the dinner table, strange manmade chickens are served that writhes and spews liquids when carved. The girl's dad, who is uncomfortably jovial, initiates awkward discussions thereby adding to the confusion. Finally, the girl's mother reveals that the girl is pregnant with the child of Henry and hence they must marry. However, they are not sure if it is actually a child. The child is severely deformed and constantly cries.

Henry and his girlfriend then move to Henry's tiny apartment and they start taking care of the child. However, unable to withstand the constant crying of the child, Henry's girlfriend leaves the apartment thus leaving the child with Henry. This makes the plotline even more confusing. While dedicatedly caring for the child, Henry experiences constant nightmares involving a woman in the radiator in the apartment. Henry then has a brief sexual encounter with a woman from the neighbourhood. However, finally, Henry removes the bandages of the child and the child disintegrates. In other words, Henry commits infanticide, which destroys the world that Henry lives in and makes him unite with the woman in the radiator. During this phase, a distinct part of the plotline gives the movie its name. We see that the head of Henry is engulfed in eraser shavings.

Unfortunately, though, the plotline hardly does justice to what the movie actually represents. In fact, any attempt to decipher the movie using its plotline is bound to backfire. It is important to mention here that 'Eraserhead' is quite different from other cult movies. While other cult movies necessarily redefine tastes and emphasize on creating an alternate culture, 'Eraserhead' is necessarily and deeply personal in nature. This essentially means that while other cult movies appeal to groups and make them question the dominant narrative, 'Eraserhead' thrives on its capacity to extract different experiences from different individuals.

'Eraserhead' is deeply introspective in nature. Through the usage of shocking and evocative imageries, the movie tries to create a very personal experience, something that is essentially distinct for distinct individuals. It is a visual and auditory assault on the audiences' sensibilities. The elements that make the movie a personal experience include the creation of a dark world that is truly alien in nature. The fact that some human actions take place within the diegesis of the movie makes for little sense when we try to deconstruct the movie in its entirety. The story in the movie is utterly incidental and hardly makes a point. However, the story gives the auteur the leeway to play around with images and sound that creates the perverse world that Henry dwells in.

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Going Deep into the World Created by 'Eraserhead':

'Eraserhead' is also about its deeply engaging technical feats. Made with a shoestring budget, the movie employs outstanding ambient black-and-white camerawork. Cinematographed jointly by Frederick Elmes and Herbert Cardwell, the visuals used in the movie create a strange paranoia. One of the trademark elements in the movie is its immaculate sound design. Helmed by Lynch himself, the movie also features the original music pieces by Fats Waller and Peter Ivers. The low intensity industrial soundtrack in the movie makes us claustrophobic. It also makes us crave an escape from the diegesis. At an early point in the movie, Spencer menacingly looks at a radiator inside his apartment. The camera covering the radiator in a peculiar track shot follows this. Accompanied by strange sound of steam, this shot hints at something imminent. However, nothing happens. Here as well, Lynch plays with the anticipation of the audiences. It is important to note that the radiator is the place where Henry imagines the heaven.

Some of the scenes in the movie plays with illusions and the futility of hope. Let us take for example a scene where Henry's beautiful neighbour comes to the apartment of Henry and have sex with him. Both Henry and the woman sink into a bed that converts into a pond of white fluid. Henry then enters the heaven and sees the woman who stays in it. Suddenly, his head disjoints and falls into a blood pool. We then see a boy grab Henry's head, run and sell the same to a pencil factory. We then find out that Henry's head is made from rubber. Eventually, we are taken back to Henry's apartment with no traces of his beautiful neighbour.

However, why does Lynch indulge in such detours? Why is he misleading the audience? Do the events seem out of place? While the first two questions could be answered by simply pointing at the shocking usage of cinematic parallel realities, the third answer could prove to be a paradox of sorts. Yes, they seem out of place and at the same time, they are not. In terms of the plotline, they might seem out of place. However, given the broader context that Lynch has created for himself, the events seem logical and coherent.

Interestingly, one gets confused between what is actually happening in the movie and what one believes is happening. 'Eraserhead' is nothing short of a psychological quagmire. The fundamental intent of the movie is not to allow us to make sense out of it – factual, emotional or intellectual. The world that is created by 'Eraserhead' is diabolical and menacing for the audiences. However, for the characters who inhibit it, the world is perfectly normal. This is the strange dichotomy created by 'Eraserhead'.

Oddly enough, this apparent absurdity also imparts a strange humour factor to the movie. The humour stems from people's behaviour to make senses from an apparent nonsensical world. Henry behaves with the deformed child exactly how a loving and caring father would. The contradiction stems from the fact that the child cannot possibly be called a child by any stretch of normal imagination. Henry looks at the child as if there is nothing abnormal about it, as if he is in a normal world handling a normal infant.

Let us take yet another example to illustrate this absurdity in a more meaningful way. Henry's meeting with his girlfriend's family is an absolute communication nightmare. Everyone behaves as if he/ she is behaving the way he/ she should. However, nobody makes any sense and the discussion is absurdly surreal. Even the activities that the family engages in are absolutely incoherent and meaningless if we apply the yardsticks that we apply in our daily life. However, when we take the world created by the movie as the base, the activities and discussions strangely start making sense.

Alternative Discourse about 'Eraserhead':

If we want to keep the discourse very basic, we shall be able to appreciate that the movie is a bizarre comedy that blows up different domestic issues to dangerous proportions. In the mess that is created in the process, the protagonist of the movie tries to get through. This is where the movie succeeds. It creates abnormal out of normal. It amplifies the drudgeries of everyday existence to a level that seems surreal and dreamy. However, it also needs to be understood here that the humour that is created in the process is not funny at all. The movie uses grotesque biological concepts in taking the fun out of the resultant humour. Deformities, gore, bleakness, darkness and the horrors of a post-industrial society make it tantalizingly evocative.

The above alternative explanation is used to make way around the movie. 'Eraserhead' seems impenetrable on the surface. The ingrained narrative in the movie does not offer any coherence. However, the dreamscape that is created through the surreal imageries offer multiple explanations with one neutralizing and countering the other. Through this movie, Lynch forms a connection between consciousness and dream consciousness. At this point, it becomes important to understand that 'Eraserhead' is not about dreams; it in itself is the dream. The question though persists. Whose dream is it anyway? The ambiguity vis-à-vis the dreamer makes the movie an audio-visual nightmare. In fact, it would not be too far from reality if we were to say that a viewer becomes the dreamer for 'Eraserhead'. However, one thing that can be said with surety is that the dream is a male dream.

One of the defining traits of 'Eraserhead' is its tryst with hallucinatory sexuality. The opening scene of the movie deals with conception. Throughout the movie, we find that the protagonist is charmed by sex. At the same time, he is frightened by sex as well. One of the motifs of the movie include creatures that seem like sperms. We also see the protagonist's strange dreams featuring a deformed woman. The protagonist also involves in a sexual encounter with his beautiful neighbour. There is also a point in the movie where the mother of the protagonist's girlfriend tries to seduce him. We also experience male gaze at multiple points in the movie.

When we try to analyze the character of Henry, we pretty well find that he represents an archetypal character. However, what evokes interest is his awkward and pacifist dormancy throughout the diegesis. He lets things happen around him without making a concerted attempt at stopping those. However, the ending of the movie provides a stark contrast. He finally does something and commits infanticide. This could be

described as the eventual culmination of domination and control that he faces in everyday life.

'Eraserhead' in deeper terms is about the corruptibility of the world. This corruption manifests itself in the form of human nature. This corruption stems from the human belief that he is different from the nature where he inhabits and he can do anything to the world. This separateness of the human nature is the premise based on which this movie is set. 'Eraserhead' shows the repercussions of this human separateness in a nightmarish form. It will not be wrong to call 'Eraserhead' as a metaphor for the excess mechanization of nature. The movie shows a dark world where the environment has become sterile and non-responsive to human interferences. Consequently, the very act of conception is looked at with a certain kind of disdain. The movie is also about the infallibility of death and the eventual dependence of life on the cycle created by death.

In another way, 'Eraserhead' offers no snapshots from physical life. It depicts an urban landscape that is divorced from all sorts of realities. We see no nature and we experience nothing that has the potential to soothe us. We see no animals except some puppies at the house of Henry's girlfriend. Even these puppies provide us with no relief and make us question their presence in the movie. Henry's apartment also looks like a dead place. We see heaps of dirt, a leafless twig, dried grass, a radiator, a bedside table and the photograph of a mushroom cloud – everything pointing towards death.

In fact, things that are supposed to be full of life are also shown as without life. When we see a garden in front of the house of Henry's girlfriend, it looks as bleak as everything else in the movie does. The fact that withered and dead shrubs and flowers populate the garden do not help the living quotient in the movie.

The home shown in the movie offers no respite from the bleakness that 'Eraserhead' so carefully creates. It is not really a happy household and does not offer the inmates any relief from the rubbles that have been created by the apocalypse that is not portrayed in the movie. Located near railway tracks, the house vibrates every time a train passes by thereby representing the same noise and filth that the entire movie propagates. The interior of the home is shown as clumsy as the exterior with pipes inconveniently shrinking the space inside the room. It becomes obvious that the auteur is clearly showing the perils of an overtly mechanized world where humanity has taken a decided backseat.

The movie is much more than what have already been discussed. Let us look at the Man in the Planet. He represents everything that is perversely wrong about the world created by 'Eraserhead'. A terrible creature, he dwells in a destroyed and decaying space with control levers. He initiates the actions in the movie by controlling the levers. These levers represent a mechanical reality far from the confines of living and thriving entities. In the final moments of the movie, it becomes clear that even the planet is not a spherical one. The planet is elongated and looks like a head. When man faces this mechanized reality, he finally comes to terms with it and decides to destroy himself.

Contradicting the man with the control levers is the woman who comes in Henry's vision of the heaven. It is interesting to note that the man's second appearance prevents Henry's attainment of heaven and the man's third appearance makes Henry indulge in an act of self-destruction. In fact, the self-destruction can be equated with Henry's freedom. We do need to have a closer look at the narrative here though.

However, as mentioned earlier as well, the key to understanding 'Eraserhead' as a coherent audiovisual text is its strange yet intriguing portrayal of sexuality. The conception process that is shown at the beginning of the diegesis is weird. It shows sperms being ejected by Henry's mouth and not penis. The entire process of reproduction is being controlled and that too in a rather strange way. The sperms themselves are not very normal and are oversized. These sperms submerge in bubbles and fade into oblivion. This questions the very concept of human regeneration and talks about its eventual futility.

If we look at it that way, it becomes clear that the process of birth is depicted in the form of negative imageries. The second depiction of birth in the movie shows a wall at Henry's apartment where the sperms that were crushed have left their indelible marks. As Henry keeps on looking at the wall, a tiny cabinet opens and we find a small worm that Henry found inside a mailbox. The worm in this case is thematically significant. It must be recoded that the worm uncannily resembles a very small foetus. It is brought to life and it moves into the darkness only to emerge into a fractured landscape. Interestingly, the worm gets inside a hole and comes back from another one. This action is repeated several times. However, what is noteworthy is that the worm grows in size each time it comes out of a hole. This could be likened with a penis being erected. The scene where Henry has a sexual encounter with his beautiful neighbour directly follows this scene. The discovery of the worm at a dark place and its subsequent hiding is indicative of Henry's first encounter with his sexual identity. The holes that amplify the worm could be considered metaphorical representations of female identity. Eventually, the mouth that consumes the worm could be representative of vagina. This mouth engulfs the camera into total darkness.

This follows a scene that somehow resembles the first birth image. The camera keeps panning in slow motion until we see another opening. However, this time we go into the constricted and very dimly lit area inside Henry's apartment room.

However, the most shocking remains the third birth imagery. Henry is decapitated once he reaches the heaven. We see that his head is inundated in a pool of blood. The head then emerges from an outer world where it is seen that it is made from rubber. It is important to understand that the imageries contain blood, violence and descending movement. We also see a stillbirth where the offspring is not alive at all. There is a possibility that the offspring is not organic as well.

Another central motif that occurs repeatedly in the movie is the presence of vagina. It appears for the first time when we take a careful look at the dinner table scene at the house of Henry's girlfriend. A manmade chicken emits a thick liquid

when carved. There is a body cavity involved here. While Henry finds the scene utterly distasteful and disgusting, the mother of Henry's girlfriend finds it sexually evocative. In fact, she goes to the extent of getting overtly physical with Henry. This scene could be linked with female sexuality or menstruation or even reproduction.

There are multiple points in the movie that remind us of the vagina. However, the depictions are not that sinister when compared with the first depiction. The later portrayals also point towards Henry's dormant wish to reenter the female womb. If we look at it carefully, we find out that the images represent absorption. We can take the examples of the fractures on the surface of the planet and the worm's mouth. However, the last image also results into possibly the film's only beautiful moment. The bed where Henry engages in sex with his beautiful neighbour turns into a milky pool and both of them sink into a radiant embrace.

Exactly at this point in the movie, Henry finally attains heaven. He makes a journey through the vagina and appear in the womb. While standing on the crumpled sperm, the deformed woman sings a song about the heaven and then makes a move towards Henry. However, a very strong ray of light stops Henry and the Man in the Planet replaces the deformed woman. This makes Henry back away and his head suddenly turns into the baby that constantly cries in a demanding tone. While Henry manages to reach the heaven, he is not allowed to possess it. This is primarily so as he entered the womb through sex. However, the movie harps on the forbidden nature of sex as it represents human procreation. Consequently, Henry is grotesquely made a part of the stillbirth image.

Themes in the Movie:

Now, let us talk a little about the central theme of the movie – the baby. While the depiction of the baby is quite inhuman, its impact on the diegesis of the movie is quite human. However, what catches the attention of a keen cinema enthusiast is its capacity to effect changes. It is constantly in charge and makes characters initiate actions. In fact, Henry's girlfriend is driven away by its constant crying. In the context of the movie, this baby cannot represent anything else apart from penis. In fact, the imagery is very clear, if we may say so. We can call it the penis that has outgrown itself. Its demand has become infinite. In fact, Henry's girlfriend leaves for not being able to keep up with its demand. It also disturbs Henry's beautiful neighbour as they engage in sex.

This needs a bit of introspection. When his girlfriend leaves him, Henry is left alone to care for the baby. Every time he makes an attempt at leaving the apartment, the baby cries out. He looks back at the baby and stops with mild concern. He reiterates that the baby is sick. However, none of Henry's actions makes any difference. However, this is where the true problem lies. The baby prevents him from reaching the heaven. To put it in simple terms, Henry is ruled by the necessity of his penis. The penis in turn is the source of the forbidden sperm, the primal force behind reproduction. This makes Henry unworthy of attaining heaven. The decapitation scene can thus be explained through the unworthiness of Henry. It becomes obvious that penis has been able to establish unfettered control.

The fact that the penis has exerted complete control is proven at another point in the movie. Once Henry returns from heaven, he gets completely lost in the thought of having sex with his beautiful neighbour. He practically goes to the point of jumping at every little noise that emanates from the hall. However, when he manages to catch a glimpse of her, another man accompanies her. The man has a deformed face and touches her inappropriately. To be frank, sex has lost its charm now. Henry looks at her and she looks back at him. However, she sees the baby instead of Henry's head.

Now that we have waded through the movie, it is essential that we do a critical analysis of the climax as well. When seen for the first time, it does not make any sense. However, with the context being set out, there seems to be a meaning that the director might have intended. Let us try to fight the reasons as to why Henry takes a scissor and opens up the baby's bandages. The answers can be multifarious. Well, we cannot really say that the act is driven by clinical interest as Henry's movements reeks of confusion. The possibility that Henry opens the bandages for finding the reasons for the baby's ailments is minimal. Therefore, we need to look at alternate possibilities. Is Henry punishing the baby for making his life a living hell? Here again, the possibility seems remote as Henry is hardly moved by any intent for action. Now, let us look at the third possibility. Is he indulging in self-release? Looking at the context of the movie, this third possibility seems to be the most logical one. Given the outcome of the activity, the third possibility becomes a certainty. This is exactly what Henry has been longing for. Self-castration and destruction of the appetite through a planned destruction of the organ is all that Henry eyes. The dying organ spews venom and its death results in a mess. The death of the baby also essentially means the death of continuity, the primal quality on which the organ sustains. The world is disbanded without the organ. While the result is absolute death, we have to remember that Henry desired exactly that. Therefore, heaven is nothing but death itself.

However, is there a linkage that could be found out between this explanation and the other one that talks about the corruption of the human mind? In fact, there is! The mechanized and dehumanized landscape that has been created by the overt dependence on technology is unable to take the forces of life forward. In fact, this is what the scenes involving the act of conception and the manmade chicken support. The discomfort that marks Henry's rendezvous with sex points towards the fact that sexual forces move beyond the control of the physical world. While consciousness should have reconciled the concept of sex and come to terms with it, sex is suppressed and feared. This creates the strange dichotomy and consequently sex is seen as being manipulative and unwanted.

In its most basic form, 'Eraserhead' is a representation of the internal tensions within men. It also represents the suppression of the primality of human existence. In taking a grotesque and weird route, Lynch brings out a haunting tale. It must be remembered that 'Eraserhead' is classified as an experimental movie that primarily highlights body horror.

However, it is much more than that. It is a metaphor into the continuity of human life. It is a journey down the slippery route of human sexuality. It blends surrealism with philosophy so much, so that both becomes indistinguishable at multiple points in the movie. In psychoanalytical terms, it talks about the importance that sex beholds in human psyche.

However, there is one aspect about the movie that makes us run for cover. It exposes the vulnerability of everything that we consider dear and good. It reduces everything that we aspire for to its constituent elements so that we start appreciating even the evil nature of the aspired object. Probably, this is the reason why cinephiles from across the world find 'Eraserhead' such a difficult movie to watch. 'Eraserhead' twists everyday objects into dark and unrecognizable things. While the intent of the director is unknown, the movie, in some twisted way, makes us embrace a thing as it is. Probably, the film makes a case for understanding even the grotesque compartments of life.

Another aspect that is striking about the movie is its sound design. Moving beyond the realm of ambience and logic, the music amplifies the meaning of the movie in ways more than one. While the sound adds to the ingrained surrealism in the movie, it also makes audience uncomfortable and purposefully so. As we might have understood, the fundamental intent of the movie is to evoke intrigue and question the inertia of life. This is where the sound comes in handy. With industrial sounds creating a frightening and nightmarish setting, we seem to be dwelling in a world that is far removed from the concept of beauty. Let us take an example to drive our point home. During the dining table scene, the sound of the manmade chicken writhing on the plate gives it a strange and uncanny angle. We can also follow the sound that is made by the elevator doors during the initial moments in the movie. The sound unsettles and makes us anticipate something that is unwanted. We can understand the importance of sound in the overall diegesis of the movie when we consider the fact that it took almost a year to complete the sound design. The movie uses a layered soundtrack with nearly 15 different layers on multiple reels. In fact, Lynch was so paranoid about the soundtrack that he brought down the eventual length of the movie by 20 minutes, as he believed that the sound during those 20 minutes was too high.

Conclusion:

To be fair to the movie, it does not boast of a storyline. It is very similar to a painting. Just as in painting, the relative positioning of the elements impart its meaning, in 'Eraserhead' as well, it is the positioning of the various events that give the movie a degree of acceptability.

Lynch also pointed towards the spirituality of the movie. In an interview, he confirmed that 'Eraserhead' is the most spiritual of his movies (Lynch, 2007). It remains a historical fact, though, that Lynch was inspired by multiple texts when he wrote the script for 'Eraserhead'. One of the influences on the script was the renowned novella 'The Metamorphosis' (1915), penned by Franz Kafka. The other significant influence was a short story by the name of 'The Nose' (1836), written by Nikolai Gogol (Olson, 2008).

What influenced the movie the most is Lynch's stay in Philadelphia, which he describes as "Hell on Earth" (Blumgart, 2014). The movie recreates the horror that Lynch had to face in Philadelphia, albeit in a surrealist manner. To put it in very succinct way, 'Eraserhead' is an experiment towards portraying the irreversible nature of death. It is quite interesting to note that the movie takes a German expressionist route in narrating its story. However, the best part about the movie is its sheer intensity. There is a singularity in the vision of the master filmmaker. He has but one objective in making the movie.

Having said all that could have been said about the movie, the movie still manages to create newer meanings. Thus, multiple critics have revisited the movie in an effort to deconstruct it further. However, no singular meaning has emerged until now. The beauty of the movie is in its incomprehensibility and its capacity to create frightening intrigue – qualities that very few movies have. It comes across as no surprise that Lynch toiled on the movie for a period of five years. At a time when movies are increasingly becoming the products of an unapologetic consumer culture, 'Eraserhead' serves the purpose of a well-meaning break. It is cerebral in nature and is undoubtedly so. 'Eraserhead' could also be effectively classified in the cyberpunk genre. However, the diegesis is much more complex and the ingrained theme is much more comprehensive. We can also initiate a debate concerning the exact genre of the movie. At once, it could be clubbed under all the following genres – philosophical, surrealist, spiritual, science fiction, body horror, dystopian neo-noir and even family drama. While dissecting the movie, it is equally important to remember the family centricity of the movie. The movie diabolically stresses on the dysfunctionality of the family structure. In many ways, Lynch could be considered talking about himself at some points of the movie.

'Eraserhead' will continue to haunt moviegoers cutting across demographics. While it remains a benchmark in American cinema, moviegoers from all across the cultural spectrum have been influenced by the subtlety of the movie. Today, 'Eraserhead' is not just a cult movie; it is much more than that. It stands for a successful audiovisual experiment that resulted in the creation of one of the finest reel creations of all time. Nothing more and nothing less.

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